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Finding Meaning in Modern Society:

Theological Insights of Viktor Emil FRANKL

Wisdom most of all means a knowledge which is simultaneously aware of its borders and limits; in line with this, the founder of the third Viennese psychotherapeutic school, Viktor Emil FRANKL, would certainly deserve a Nobel Prize in wisdom. When evaluating his theological insights, we follow the ancient Eastern Orthodox rule: a theologian is one who prays. The most important resource of a therapist and healer is her or his personality, and FRANKL certainly regarded his patients as his teachers. Now we try to connect the wisdom, the theological insights and the therapeutic pedagogy of FRANKL.

We are provided with an integrated and unified life-œuvre in the case of FRANKL, which contains many repetitions and re-emphases. It is also characterized by an interdisciplinary and frequent rotation of scientific perspectives: his interest and methodology are extremely varied, since in his views one method can never be totally fulfilling and effective.

His language is not uniform, nor does he intend to accomplish this. He says everything in at least four or five places and instances, and each time a bit differently. He has a wonderful sense for easy-to-remember and citable aphoristic formulations.

In a positive sense, he is characterised by a kind of integrative eclecticism in his writings and thinking: his conviction is that soul and psychology are open to wide spaces, and only the cooperation of the different branches and movements can lead to significant scientific results and optimal therapeutic effects.

It was always emphasized by FRANKL that the less psychotherapy intends to fulfill an ancillary role in relation to theology, the more services it can provide for it actually, since one need not be a servant to provide services for the other. Thus, we are grateful for all

the services provided by existence-analysis and logotherapy to mono-theistic theologies.

FINDING MEANING THROUGH SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

The fullness of human life consists in the harmonised cooperation of eros, ethos and logos. Existence-analysis and logotherapy draw heavily from the positive and life-centred line of existentialist philosophy, and depict the human in her or his unity, integrity and wholeness, through the teamwork of these dimensions, recognising the peculiarity of all aspects without trying to derive one solely from the other. According to FRANKL, psychotherapy should be brought back to medical science, through the demythologizing of psychotherapy and rehumanisation of medical science.

Thus the *psychiatric credo* of FRANKL is the following: 'I believe in the survival of the spiritual person behind the symptoms of the illness.' He builds his *psychotherapeutic credo* on this notion also: 'I believe in the spiritual ability of the person, which is able to make a distance from body and mind in all conditions and circumstances, and to place itself at a fruitful distance from them.'

Methodologically, three processes are especially worth our attention: the modification of attitude, paradox intention, and de-reflexion. Through the *modification of attitude*, the therapist always provides attitudes and not contents; instead of converting the person, the therapist helps the patient's own characteristic values to break through, working towards the possibility of fitting it into the personality.

The aim of *paradox intention* is to educate tragic optimism, applied together with comic pessimism (exaggerated self-ridicule). *De-reflexion* helps us to turn towards others with honest interest; instead of being fixed on ourselves, it urges

us to forget and put ourselves into brackets, in self-emptying *kenosis*. Through this, one regains also her or his natural charm and impartiality, since keeping a distance from ourselves and the things around us helps us to bear our cross in dignity.

Principally, one does not need balance or homeostasis but a healthy dose of *creative tension*, which is constituted by the things already reached and yet to be done. In other words, it means the distance between what the human is and what she or he must become. Human existence is characterised most of all by its self-transcendence, and self-realisation can be reached only through this. The more one transcends and forgets oneself, the more one becomes oneself and human. All of us are able to make sacrifices out of love for others; the genuine and full value and meaning of human life consists, according to FRANKL, also in sacrificing it for something or someone.

TRUTH: THE MUTUAL REFRACTION OF PERSPECTIVES

Up to the point where we reach absolute truth (in the Reign of God), we must be content with the notion that relative truths correct each other; we must dare to be one-sided in a way that is fortunately aware of its one-sidedness, which means that it uses wisdom in a creative way. Mutual help in approaching truth and taking it seriously multiplies the chances of self-transformation and self-correction as well.

Even though we look at the world from different perspectives, for all of our stances there is only one exactly right perspective to be found. Thus absolute truth exists not in spite of the relativity of these perspectives, but precisely because of it. The only absolute allowed by reality for humanity is the absolute uniqueness of that perspective in which reality manifests itself for each human being. This is what

is meant principally by unity in diversity and diversity in unity, and in this way the recognition of perspectives does not necessarily have to lead to relativity.

FAITH, RELIGION AND RELIGIOUSNESS

Unconscious faith means a natural relationship with the Transcendent. It is not the unconscious faith suppressed in a Freudian sense, but one which is not (yet, already or currently) manifested in the conscience. Faith is not that kind of reality which is lessened by the reality of the imagined, but rather it is one which is multiplied by the existence of the thinker. One's faith in meaning is definitely a transcendental category.

Religion is a radical and persistent will for final and superior meaning. For the religious person, life appears in a transcendental transparency, in which consciousness, awareness and responsibility are given by the Mandator, together with the tasks for our life. There is a religiosity which we perform only as far as we are in trouble (this is fox-hole religiosity); and another kind, which we follow so far as we prosper (let us call it business religiosity).

But religion is similar most of all to

language, in the sense that one can approach truth in many languages, but is unable to reach it fully in any. What is even more important is that one can be wrong in every language, insofar as one can lie in all of them. Maybe we are heading towards a deeply personal religiousness, from which all of us can find her or his most personal language to address God.

FRANKL indicates that for a religion, temptation is obscurity, and for a denomination it is rigidity: without veins, blood flows away, and without blood, veins

turn rigid. There cannot be antagonism between the responsible experiences and deeds of religious and non-religious persons; from the point of view of therapy and healing, religious experience and dimension have rather a supplementary relation. Because of this, when a patient stands on the firm ground of religious faith, the therapist should not be opposed in using the person's religious conviction for the sake of healing, thus relying on her or his spiritual resources as well.

Religiousness is the experience of our fragmentation and relativity in the face of such a personality, whose mere naming, the 'Absolute,' is an act of sheer audacity in itself. The long tradition of apophatic, negative theology draws our attention to this fact as well: according to it, the only thing that is possible to name concerning God is what God is not, because the Absolute is not in any of the dimensions, but rather is the frame of reference itself.

For the process of Searching, the Found does not exist; but for the Searcher, the Searched-for always exists. Intentionality bursts immanency, but still it stops in front of the Transcendent. God is transcending everything always, but God is at the same time always intended.



Suggested reading

- FRANKL Viktor Emil, *Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*. Wien, 1946.
 FRANKL Viktor Emil, *Der unbewußte Gott: Psychotherapie und Religion*. München, 1948.
 FRANKL Viktor Emil, *Logos und Existenz: Drei Vorträge*. Wien, 1951.
 FRANKL Viktor Emil, *Der Mensch auf der Suche nach Sinn: Zur Rehumanisierung der Psychotherapie*. Freiburg im Breisgau, 1972.

FRANKL Viktor Emil, *Der leidende Mensch: Anthropologische Grundlagen der Psychotherapie*. Bern, 1975.

FRANKL Viktor Emil – LAPIDE Pinchas, *Gottsuche und Sinnfrage*. Gütersloh, 2005.

TAVEL Peter, *Smysl života podle Viktoru Emanuela Frankla*. Praha, 2007.

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Many times God is silent, but God is always called for; God is irrevealable, but revealed already by Godself.

Karl RAHNER SI points out that the existential introduction to the mystery of faith (mystagogy) warns humanity of finding meaning: turning directly to the given world, the person should experience Transcendence profoundly and genuinely. The task of the healer and therapist is to widen and broaden the horizon of the patient in such a way that the full width, height and depth of the possible meaning of her or his life would become conscious and visible for her or him.

PERSON AND COMMUNITY

FRANKL summarised in ten theses the significance of personal existence. The *person* is individual, existential, unconsciously ego-like, creative, dynamic, supernaturally believing, (self-) transcendent in her or his soul, with indissoluble integrity and absolute dignity. Personality is provided by irreplaceability and uniqueness, in other words perfection and on-sidedness; on the other hand, being the image of God also means the possibility of infinity in humanity.

Community is justified as an essential task, since through it the human becomes a fully valuable member of a bigger whole. According to FRANKL, person and community are in a dialectical relationship: it is only community that guarantees the meaning of personality for individuals, and it is only through the preserved and enlarged personality that the meaning of community is secured.

Community plays an important and fundamental role in Christian theology also; for example in ecclesiology, in a richly explained metaphor, the Church is the Body of Christ. But this also means that none of the members should imagine that it is not themselves but others who are sick and wounded, since it is always the whole body which can become infected and ill. Following from monotheism, the sense of the unity of humankind is urged as well (*monanthropism* or *monanthropologism*), which transcends all dividing multiformity.

One of the dimensions of inter-religious dialogue is precisely this teaching on the oneness and uniqueness of humanity and on planetary (ecumenical) responsibility, including the integral awareness of the belonging together with all people of goodwill. The only chance of survival for humanity depends on whether religions and nations finally discover a common and uplifting task which will unite them. Service to humanity becomes, in such a way, a service to God at the same time.

EXPULSION AND SALVATION

Perhaps humanity has to be *expelled from Paradise* again and again, in order to aim for higher goals, thus finding its inner balance, harmony, creative tension and greatness. The dawn of the sixth day of creation was when a sudden mutation provided humanoids with fourteen million (or billion) neurons, which we have been unable to use fully ever since.

On the seventh day God took a rest, and since then it has been up to humanity itself to do what it can and create what it wills. In a certain sense, God awaits: let us see how humanity realises the potentialities created with it. God is therefore still waiting, still resting, it is still Saturday—a permanent Sabbath.

Eternal *salvation* must be a consequence: among other things, the consequence of the fulfillment of our duty, mission and vocation. Humanity should not aim to be happy, but to be worthy of happiness: real happiness and joy is the side-effect of the fulfillment of meaning, and genuine self-realisation will be a side-effect of self-transcendence as well. Happiness, joy and salvation are always side-effects and side-products, and are ruined exactly in such measure as they are aimed at as ends in themselves.

GRACE, LOVE AND DIALOGUE

Martin BUBER also emphasizes that the life of the mind itself is *dialogical*, because the I becomes I only by means of the Thou. Only that Ego, which is directed towards a Thou, can integrate its own Id. Karl JASPERS further underlines the need for genuine existential encounter, communication and profound dialogue between human and human. From person to person, soul to soul, the path and the bridge are narrow.

Love means that we are able to say 'Thou' to someone, and we are also able to say 'Yes' to that very person, envisioning in her or him what she or he can become in her or his existence and maybe must be as well. Love means seeing the other person in the way God thinks, dreams and sees her or him. Therefore, love is directed towards the singularity, uniqueness and irreplaceability of the other person, and says a resounding 'Yes' to her or him, affirming her or his whole existence.

In the path of being loved, without our contribution and personal merit, by *grace* we partake in the fulfillment which consists in the realisation of our uniqueness and singularity. Love does not make one blind, but visual and visionary. One becomes sensitive and capable of noticing and recognising values, reading others with love and interpreting everything to their benefit; this is to be called the *hermeneutics of goodwill*.

Next to the grace of being loved, we find at the same time the magic and miracle of love. Love is the only way to understand the inner core of the personality of the other. No one can get to know the essence of the other, unless it is by loving her or him.

The actor, blinded by the light of the lamps, sees nothing in the place of the auditorium but a big black hole: she or he never sees the audience in front of whom she or he is playing. But according to some (and among those we can count also Viktor Emil FRANKL) exactly where we see nothing sits the Great Spectator, who looks at us steadily and with love, expecting from us something meaningful and dignified.